SŪRAH 58

Al-Mujādalah

(The Pleading)

Prologue

In this *sūrah*, as in several that follow, we are invited to witness some of the events that the first Islamic society experienced as it began to take shape in Madīnah. In this way, we see how it was moulded and prepared to undertake its role in the world. It was a huge undertaking, starting with the development of a new, complete and comprehensive concept of life that continues to serve as the basis for how the Muslim community conducts its practical affairs. That first Muslim community, however, was to present this concept to the world; it was its responsibility to establish a new foundation for life based on this concept.

That first Muslim community, which was being prepared for this great role, consisted of ordinary human beings. Its elite were the Muhājirīn and Anṣār whose concept of their new faith had matured and who now dedicated themselves to it completely. They understood the truth of their existence as part of the existence of the universe. Thus, they realized that they were part of God's will manifested in the universe. They neither deviated from it nor lagged behind in their march with it. They were, in fact, as they are described in the last verse of the *sūrah*: "*You shall not find people who truly believe in God and the Last Day on friendly terms with those who contend against God and His Messenger, even though they may be their fathers, sons, brothers, or kindred. These are the people in whose*

hearts God has inscribed faith, and whom He has strengthened with a spirit of His own. He will admit them into gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide. Well pleased is God with them, and they with Him. They are the party of God. It is the partisans of God that will be truly successful." (Verse 22)

This elite group formed a minority in the ever-increasing numbers that swelled the Muslim community's ranks, particularly after it came to be held in awe, and this before Makkah had fallen to Islam. People flocked to the Muslim community but without having received enough Islamic education or having lived long enough in an Islamic environment. Moreover, hypocrites found their way into the Muslim community, trying to serve their own interests or avoid personal trouble. These vacillated between the Muslim community and its still powerful opponents, whether idolaters or Jews.

To educate this community in preparation for its great and important role in the world at large required strenuous effort, patience and slow but sure treatment in small and serious matters alike. All in all, it was a major social engineering project that Islam and the Prophet undertook. It sought to build individuals who could establish an Islamic society and an Islamic state based on the divine constitution. Each person had to understand this code of living, implement it and carry it to the world at large in the form of a vibrant society. It was not therefore a mere theory devoid of substance.

In this *sūrah*, and several *sūrahs* that follow, we are shown some practical examples of this great endeavour as well as some aspects of the Qur'ānic method of building the Islamic character and dealing with events, personal whims and habits. We also see some aspects of the long conflict between Islam and its opponents: Jews, idolaters and hypocrites.

This *sūrah* in particular gives us an inspiring image of the care God took of this fledgling Muslim community as He provided it with a sound education and purged its unwanted streaks, developing His presence within its consciousness. He showed the Muslim community that He was with them looking after even their most private affairs and minor events, protecting it from its enemies' schemes, whether subtle or apparent. God had placed it fully under His care and, therefore, He moulded

its morality, manners, habits and traditions. Those Muslims formed His party in human society and they carried His banner, identifying themselves as His people on earth.

Thus the *sūrah* draws right at the start a picture from that unique period of human history, characterized by direct contact between heaven and earth, and with heaven's direct involvement in the daily life of this particular group of people: "*God has heard the words of the woman who pleads with you concerning her husband, and complained to God. God has heard what you both had to say. God hears all and sees all.*" (Verse 1) What we see here is the involvement of heaven, providing judgment, in the ordinary affair of a small, poor family. God listened to the woman's argument as she pleaded with the Prophet, yet 'Ā'ishah, the Prophet's wife who was nearby, could hardly hear her. This picture fills us with the pleasure of feeling God to be near us, taking care of our concerns.

The *sūrah* then confirms that those who contend with God and His Messenger, i.e. enemies of the Muslim community, are destined to be the losers on earth and to endure humiliating suffering in the life to come. They will be punished for their evil deeds which God reckons but they forget, even though these are their own deeds: "*God is witness to all things.*" (Verse 6)

This is followed by a reminder that God is present when any group of people, three or more, engage in secret discussion, thinking that they are totally unobserved. God is with them wherever they happen to be: "*On the Day of Resurrection He will tell them the truth of what they used to do. God has full knowledge of everything.*" (Verse 7) Our feelings of God's presence are here enhanced by the realization that He is fully aware of all that takes place.

This reminder of God's presence serves as preparation for the warning issued to those who in their secret conversations conspire to harm the Muslims and cause them grief. They are warned that God sees all their scheming and records all their conspiring. He knows what they intend of sin, aggression and disobedience of God's Messenger. They are told that God will take them to account for all this. He will punish them as they deserve to be punished. The Muslims are also issued with a command not to speak in secret about anything that is in conflict with righteousness and God-consciousness.

The *sūrah* continues with its purpose of educating the Muslim community, urging the believers to adopt good and friendly manners, showing their obedience, when they attend the Prophet's circle or any circle of study or worship. It lays down some rules for discussion with the Prophet, highlighting the seriousness of such discussion.

The remainder of the *sūrah* speaks about the hypocrites who befriend the Jews and conspire with them, and who then try to conceal this with false swearing before the Prophet and the Muslim community. It depicts an image of them in the life to come when they are also quick to repeat their false oaths, trying thus to avoid God's punishment. They think that since their swearing in this world spared them the anger of the Prophet and his followers, it may spare them God's anger on the Day of Resurrection. The *sūrah* re-emphasizes that those who contend with God and His Messenger are the ones to suffer humiliation; they are the losers. This is something that God has decreed, just as He decreed that He and His messengers will prevail. This is stated in order to show the weakness of any hostile position. Yet at the time, some Muslims thought such people to be too strong and tried to maintain good relations with them. They did not realize the importance of the Muslim community having an independent stand under God's banner, and feeling safe under His care.

As the *sūrah* draws to its end, it paints a bright picture of God's party, represented at that time by the elite community of Muhājirīn and Anṣār. This is the situation that the Qur'ān wants the Muslim community to end up with.

Al-Mujādalah (The Pleading)

سُورَةُ المُجَادِلَة

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

قَدْ سَمِعَ اللَّهُ قَوْلَ الَّتِي تُجَادِلُكَ فِي زَوْجِهَا
وَتَشْتَكِي إِلَى اللَّهِ وَاللَّهُ يَسْمَعُ تَحَاوُرَكُمَا ۚ
إِنَّ اللَّهَ سَمِيعٌ بَصِيرٌ ﴿١﴾

God has heard the words of the woman who pleads with you concerning her husband, and complained to God. God has heard what you both had to say. God hears all and sees all. (1)

الَّذِينَ يُظَاهِرُونَ مِنكُم مِّن نِّسَائِهِم
مَّا هُنَّ أُمَّهَاتِهِمْ ۖ إِنْ أُمَّهَاتُهُمْ إِلَّا اللَّائِي
وَلَدْنَهُمْ ۚ وَإِنَّهُمْ لَيَقُولُونَ مُنكَرًا
مِّنَ الْقَوْلِ وَزُورًا ۚ وَإِنَّ اللَّهَ لَعَفُوٌّ
غَفُورٌ ﴿٢﴾

Even if any of you say to your wives, 'You are to me like my mother's back,' they are not your mothers; their only mothers are those who gave them birth. What they say is iniquitous and false. Yet God pardons and forgives. (2)

وَالَّذِينَ يُظَاهِرُونَ مِن نِّسَائِهِمْ ثُمَّ
يَعُودُونَ لِمَا قَالُوا فَتَحْرِيرُ رَقَبَةٍ
مِّن قَبْلِ أَن يَتَمَاسَّا ۚ ذَٰلِكُمْ
تُوعَظُونَ بِهِ ۚ وَاللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ
خَبِيرٌ ﴿٣﴾

Those who separate themselves from their wives by saying, 'You are as unlawful to me as my mother,' and then go back on what they have said, must atone by freeing a slave before the couple may resume their full marital relation. This is an admonition to you, and God is fully aware of all that you do. (3)

فَمَن لَّمْ يَجِدْ فَصِيَامُ شَهْرَيْنِ مُتَتَابِعَيْنِ
مِن قَبْلِ أَن يَتَمَاسَّا ۚ فَمَن لَّمْ يَسْتَطِعْ
فَإِطْعَامُ سِتِّينَ مِسْكِينًا ۚ ذَٰلِكَ لِتُؤْمِنُوا
بِاللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ ۚ وَتِلْكَ حُدُودُ اللَّهِ ۗ
وَلِلْكَافِرِينَ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿٤﴾

However, he who does not have the means shall fast instead for two consecutive months before the couple may resume their full marital relation; and he who is unable to do it shall feed sixty needy people; this, so that you may prove your faith in God and His Messenger. Such are the bounds set by God. Grievous suffering awaits those who will not believe. (4)

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يُحَادُّونَ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ كُبِتُوا
كَمَا كُبِتَ الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِمْ ۚ وَقَدْ أَنزَلْنَا
آيَاتٍ بَيِّنَاتٍ ۚ وَلِلْكَافِرِينَ عَذَابٌ
مُّهِينٌ ﴿٥﴾

Those who contend against God and His Messenger shall be brought low as those who lived before them were brought low. We have bestowed from on high clear revelations. Shameful suffering awaits the unbelievers (5)

يَوْمَ يَبْعَثُهُمُ اللَّهُ جَمِيعًا فَيُنَبِّئُهُم
بِمَا عَمِلُوا ۚ أَحْصَاهُ اللَّهُ وَنَسُوهُ ۚ
وَاللَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ شَهِيدٌ ﴿٦﴾

on the day when God will raise them all from the dead and tell them exactly all that they did in life. God will have taken it all into account, even though they may have forgotten it. God is witness to all things. (6)

أَلَمْ تَرَ أَنَّ اللَّهَ يَعْلَمُ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي
الْأَرْضِ ۖ مَا يَكُونُ مِن نَّجْوَىٰ
ثَلَاثَةٍ إِلَّا هُوَ رَابِعُهُمْ وَلَا خَمْسَةٍ إِلَّا هُوَ

Are you not aware that God knows all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth? Never can a secret conversation take place between three people where He is not the fourth; nor between five where He is

سَادِسُهُمْ وَلَآ أَدْنَىٰ مِن ذَٰلِكَ وَلَآ أَكْثَرَ
إِلَّا هُوَ مَعَهُمْ أَيْنَ مَا كَانُوا ۖ ثُمَّ يُنَبِّئُهُم
بِمَا عَمِلُوا يَوْمَ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ بِكُلِّ شَىْءٍ
عَلِيمٌ ﴿٧﴾

not the sixth, nor between less or more than that without Him being with them, wherever they may be. On the Day of Resurrection He will tell them the truth of what they used to do. God has full knowledge of everything. (7)

أَلَمْ تَرَ إِلَى ٱلَّذِينَ نُهُوا۟ عَنِ ٱلنَّجْوَىٰ ثُمَّ
يَعُودُونَ لِمَا نُهُوا۟ عَنْهُ وَيَتَنَٰجَوْنَ
بِٱلْإِثْمِ وَٱلْعُدْوَٰنِ وَمَعْصِيَتِ
ٱلرَّسُولِ وَإِذَا جَآءُوكَ حَيَّوْكَ بِمَا لَمْ
يُحَيِّكَ بِهِ ٱللَّهُ وَيَقُولُونَ فِىٓ
أَنفُسِهِمْ لَوْلَا يُعَذِّبُنَا ٱللَّهُ بِمَا نَقُولُ ۚ
حَسْبُهُمْ جَهَنَّمُ يَصْلَوْنَهَا ۖ فَبِئْسَ
ٱلْمَصِيرُ ﴿٨﴾

Have you not seen how those that have been forbidden to hold secret conversations still revert to what they have been forbidden? They conspire with one another with a view to sinful doings, aggressive conduct and disobedience of God's Messenger. When these people come to you they greet you with words God does not use to greet you. They say to themselves, 'Why does God not punish us for what we say?' Hell will be punishment enough for them. They will burn there. How vile a journey's end! (8)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ إِذَا تَنَٰجَيْتُمْ فَلَا تَتَنَٰجَوْا۟
بِٱلْإِثْمِ وَٱلْعُدْوَٰنِ وَمَعْصِيَتِ ٱلرَّسُولِ
وَتَنَٰجَوْا۟ بِٱلْبِرِّ وَٱلتَّقْوَىٰ ۖ وَٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ ٱلَّذِىٓ
إِلَيْهِ تُحْشَرُونَ ﴿٩﴾

Believers, when you converse in secret, do not do so with a view to sinful doings, aggressive conduct and disobedience of God's Messenger, but rather hold counsel to promote righteousness and God-consciousness. Always remain God-fearing; to Him you will be gathered. (9)

إِنَّمَا ٱلنَّجْوَىٰ مِنَ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنِ لِيَحْزُنَ
ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَلَيْسَ بِضَآرِّهِمْ شَيْـًٔا
إِلَّا بِإِذْنِ ٱللَّهِ ۚ وَعَلَى ٱللَّهِ فَلْيَتَوَكَّلِ
ٱلْمُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

[All other kinds of] secret conversation is the work of Satan, designed to cause grief to the believers. Yet he cannot harm them in the least, unless it be by God's leave. In God, then, let the believers place their trust. (10)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ إِذَا قِيلَ لَكُمْ
تَفَسَّحُوا۟ فِى ٱلْمَجَٰلِسِ فَٱفْسَحُوا۟
يَفْسَحِ ٱللَّهُ لَكُمْ ۖ وَإِذَا قِيلَ ٱنشُزُوا۟
فَٱنشُزُوا۟ يَرْفَعِ ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟
مِنكُمْ وَٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُوا۟ ٱلْعِلْمَ دَرَجَٰتٍ ۚ
وَٱللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرٌ ﴿١١﴾

Believers, when you are told to make room for one another in your gatherings, then do so, and God will make room for you. If you are told to rise up, then do so. God will elevate, by many degrees, those of you who believe and those who have been given knowledge. God is fully aware of all that you do. (11)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ إِذَا نَٰجَيْتُمُ ٱلرَّسُولَ
فَقَدِّمُوا۟ بَيْنَ يَدَىْ نَجْوَىٰكُمْ صَدَقَةً ۚ ذَٰلِكَ
خَيْرٌ لَّكُمْ وَأَطْهَرُ ۚ فَإِن لَّمْ تَجِدُوا۟ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ
غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿١٢﴾

Believers, when you wish to speak to God's Messenger in private, offer something in charity before you speak to him. That is better for you and more conducive to purity. If you do not have the means, God is Much-Forgiving, Ever Merciful. (12)

ءَأَشْفَقْتُمْ أَن تُقَدِّمُوا۟ بَيْنَ يَدَىْ نَجْوَىٰكُمْ
صَدَقَٰتٍ ۚ فَإِذْ لَمْ تَفْعَلُوا۟ وَتَابَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيْكُمْ
فَأَقِيمُوا۟ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَءَاتُوا۟ ٱلزَّكَوٰةَ وَأَطِيعُوا۟
ٱللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُۥ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ خَبِيرٌۢ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

Do you hesitate to offer charity before you speak with the Prophet? Since you did not offer charity, and God has turned to you in His mercy, attend regularly to prayer and pay your *zakāt* [i.e. obligatory charity] and obey God and His Messenger. God is well aware of your actions. (13)

أَلَمْ تَرَ إِلَى ٱلَّذِينَ تَوَلَّوْا۟ قَوْمًا غَضِبَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيْهِم مَّا هُم مِّنكُمْ وَلَا مِنْهُمْ وَيَحْلِفُونَ عَلَى ٱلْكَذِبِ وَهُمْ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

Have you not seen those who would be friends with people who have incurred God's anger? They belong neither to you nor to them. They knowingly swear to falsehood. (14)

أَعَدَّ ٱللَّهُ لَهُمْ عَذَابًا شَدِيدًا ۖ إِنَّهُمْ سَآءَ مَا كَانُوا۟ يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

God has prepared for them grievous suffering. Evil indeed is what they do. (15)

ٱتَّخَذُوٓا۟ أَيْمَٰنَهُمْ جُنَّةً فَصَدُّوا۟ عَن سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ فَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ مُّهِينٌ ﴿١٦﴾

They use their oaths as a cover [for their falseness], and they turn people away from the path of God. Hence, shameful suffering awaits them. (16)

لَن تُغْنِىَ عَنْهُمْ أَمْوَٰلُهُمْ وَلَآ أَوْلَٰدُهُم مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ شَيْـًٔا ۚ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ أَصْحَٰبُ ٱلنَّارِ ۖ هُمْ فِيهَا خَٰلِدُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

Neither their wealth nor their children will be of the least avail to them against God. They are destined for the fire, where they will abide. (17)

يَوْمَ يَبْعَثُهُمُ ٱللَّهُ جَمِيعًا فَيَحْلِفُونَ لَهُۥ كَمَا يَحْلِفُونَ لَكُمْ ۖ وَيَحْسَبُونَ أَنَّهُمْ عَلَىٰ شَىْءٍ ۚ أَلَآ إِنَّهُمْ هُمُ ٱلْكَٰذِبُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

On the day when God will raise them all from the dead, they will swear before Him as they swear now before you, thinking that they have something to stand upon. It is they who are indeed liars. (18)

ٱسْتَحْوَذَ عَلَيْهِمُ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنُ فَأَنسَىٰهُمْ ذِكْرَ ٱللَّهِ ۚ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ حِزْبُ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنِ ۚ أَلَآ إِنَّ حِزْبَ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنِ هُمُ ٱلْخَٰسِرُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

Satan has gained mastery over them and thus caused them to remain oblivious of the remembrance of God. They are the party of Satan. It is the partisans of Satan who will truly be the losers. (19)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يُحَآدُّونَ ٱللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُۥٓ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ
فِى ٱلْأَذَلِّينَ ﴿٢٠﴾

Those who contend against God and His Messenger will be among the most abject. (20)

كَتَبَ ٱللَّهُ لَأَغْلِبَنَّ أَنَا۠ وَرُسُلِىٓ ۚ
إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ قَوِىٌّ عَزِيزٌ ﴿٢١﴾

God has thus ordained: 'I shall most certainly prevail, I and My messengers.' God is indeed powerful, almighty. (21)

لَّا تَجِدُ قَوْمًا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِٱللَّهِ وَٱلْيَوْمِ
ٱلْءَاخِرِ يُوَآدُّونَ مَنْ حَآدَّ ٱللَّهَ
وَرَسُولَهُۥ وَلَوْ كَانُوٓا۟ ءَابَآءَهُمْ
أَوْ أَبْنَآءَهُمْ أَوْ إِخْوَٰنَهُمْ أَوْ
عَشِيرَتَهُمْ ۚ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ كَتَبَ فِى
قُلُوبِهِمُ ٱلْإِيمَٰنَ وَأَيَّدَهُم
بِرُوحٍ مِّنْهُ ۖ وَيُدْخِلُهُمْ جَنَّٰتٍ
تَجْرِى مِن تَحْتِهَا ٱلْأَنْهَٰرُ خَٰلِدِينَ
فِيهَا ۚ رَضِىَ ٱللَّهُ عَنْهُمْ وَرَضُوا۟ عَنْهُ ۚ
أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ حِزْبُ ٱللَّهِ ۚ أَلَآ إِنَّ حِزْبَ
ٱللَّهِ هُمُ ٱلْمُفْلِحُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾

You shall not find people who truly believe in God and the Last Day on friendly terms with those who contend against God and His Messenger, even though they may be their fathers, sons, brothers, or kindred. These are the people in whose hearts God has inscribed faith, and whom He has strengthened with a spirit of His own. He will admit them into gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide. Well pleased is God with them, and they with Him. They are the party of God. It is the partisans of God that will be truly successful. (22)

A Personal Case in Dispute

God has heard the words of the woman who pleads with you concerning her husband, and complained to God. God has heard what you both had to say. God hears all and sees all. Even if any of you say to your wives, 'You are to me like my mother's back,' they are not your mothers;

their only mothers are those who gave them birth. What they say is iniquitous and false. Yet God pardons and forgives. Those who separate themselves from their wives by saying, 'You are as unlawful to me as my mother,' and then go back on what they have said, must atone by freeing a slave before the couple may resume their full marital relation. This is an admonition to you, and God is fully aware of all that you do. However, he who does not have the means shall fast instead for two consecutive months before the couple may resume their full marital relation; and he who is unable to do it shall feed sixty needy people; this, so that you may prove your faith in God and His Messenger. Such are the bounds set by God. Grievous suffering awaits those who will not believe. (Verses 1–4)

In pre-Islamic days, a man who became angry with his wife might say to her, "You are to me like the back of my mother", and thereafter she was forbidden to him. She was not divorced however, but rather in a state of suspense. She could neither have normal marital relations with her husband nor be free to find some other arrangement for herself. This was yet another aspect of the unfair treatment of women in pre-Islamic Arabia.

These verses speak of one such event that took place before the ruling on this problem, known as *ẓihār*,[1] had been laid down. The details of the case are related in the following *ḥadīth* quoting the woman at the centre of the case, Khuwaylah bint Tha'labah:

> It was concerning me and Aws ibn al-Ṣāmit that God revealed the opening verses of the *sūrah*, The Pleading. I was married to him and he had grown old, with a quick temper. He came in one day and I questioned something he had said. He was angry as a result and said to me, 'You are to me like my mother's back'. He then went out and sat with his people for some time. He came back later and he indicated that he wanted to have sex. I said: "In no way! By Him who holds Khuwaylah's soul in His hand, you cannot approach me

1. The word *ẓihār* is derived from *ẓahr*, which means 'back', in reference to the formula used in these cases when a man would tell his wife that she was to him as unlawful as his mother's back. – Editor's note.

when you have said what you said until God and His Messenger have ruled in our case. He tried to force me, but I overpowered him in the way a woman can overpower a weak old man. I left him and went to one of my neighbours to borrow a dress from her.

I went to the Prophet and sat in front of him. I told him what had happened and complained strongly about my husband's bad manners. The Prophet said to me: "Khuwaylah! Your cousin is an old man; so be kind and God-fearing in your treatment of him." Before I left, revelations were bestowed from on high concerning me. The Prophet experienced what he usually experienced when revelations were given to him. Then he came to and said: "Khuwylah! God has revealed Qur'ānic verses concerning you and your mate." He then read to me the verses starting with "*God has heard the words of the woman who pleads with you concerning her husband, and complained to God. God has heard what you both had to say. God hears all and sees all,*" up to "*grievous suffering awaits those who will not believe.*"

The Prophet then said to me: "Tell him to free a slave." I said: "Messenger of God! He does not have the means to do so." He said: "Then let him fast two consecutive months." I said: "He is certainly an old man who cannot fast." He said: "He should then feed sixty poor people with a *wisq*[2] of dates." I said: "Messenger of God! By God, he cannot afford that." The Prophet then said: "We will help him, then, with a sack of dates." I said: "Messenger of God! I, too, will help him with another sack." The Prophet said: "That is good and kind of you. Go and give this to charity on his behalf, and take good care of your cousin." I did as the Prophet told me. [Related by Aḥmad and Abū Dāwūd.]

This, then, is the case of the woman whose argument with the Prophet God in His majesty heard and listened to. It is on the basis of this case that God pronounced His ruling from on high, giving this woman her right so that she and her husband could be free of worry. He thus showed the Muslims what to do if such a family problem occurred.

2. A *wisq* is a measure of volume estimated to weigh about 130 kilogrammes of wheat. – Editor's note.

This is the personal situation that opens a *sūrah* of the Qur'ān, God's book, whose words are echoed by the universe as they are bestowed from on high. It opens with the statement, '*God has heard the words of the woman who pleads with you concerning her husband...*' We see here that God is present in this private case of a woman who is a mere individual in the community at large. God is not so preoccupied with conducting the affairs of the universe as not to listen to an individual's case and give His ruling on it.

It was indeed a serious matter that such an event should take place and that a community of people should feel that God was present with them as they went about their daily business. He, in His majesty, the Supreme, the Overpowering, to whom belong the heavens and the earth, responds to such ordinary problems; how compassionately overwhelming!

'Ā'ishah says: "All praise is due to God who hears all sounds. The pleading woman, Khawlah, came to the Prophet and spoke to him in a corner of my home. I could not hear what she said. Then God revealed that '*God has heard the words of the woman who pleads with you concerning her husband...*'" [Related by al-Bukhārī and al-Nasā'ī.]

As given by Khawlah – or Khuwaylah, which is a form of endearment – this report and how she went to the Prophet and argued with him, then the verdict given in the Qur'ān gives us a picture of the life of this unique community during that amazing period of history. People in that community felt their direct bond with heaven and awaited directives from on high regarding its ordinary affairs. The response was soon forthcoming, often given as people were waiting. Thus the whole community felt that they were God's dependents: He took care of them and they looked for His care just as young children expect to be cared for by their parents.

Education Through Practice

When we look at the Qur'ānic report of this case, we cannot miss that elements of education and guidance are given side by side with the verdict and the comment on it. This is the usual method of the Qur'ān, providing all that is necessary.

"*God has heard the words of the woman who pleads with you concerning her husband, and complained to God. God has heard what you both had to say. God hears all and sees all.*" (Verse 1) This is an amazing opening that says, you have not been alone; God was present, listening to you. He heard what the woman said, pleading with you and complaining to Him. He already knew the whole story and was fully aware of what discussion had taken place. He hears all and sees all. In this highly inspiring way the Qur'ān presents all that occurred but without the involvement of a third party.

The *sūrah* then states the principle that governs such cases: "*Even if any of you say to your wives, 'You are to me like my mother's back,' they are not your mothers; their only mothers are those who gave them birth. What they say is iniquitous and false. Yet God pardons and forgives.*" (Verse 2) This deals with the case in its entirety. *Ẓihār* does not rely on any solid basis. A wife is not a mother so as to become forbidden like one. Somebody's mother is the woman that gave birth to that person. A wife cannot become a mother at the utterance of a word or a few words. Such a statement lacks all substance, it is utter nonsense. In life, all relations should be based on what is true, clear and solid so as to prevent any muddle or confusion. "*Yet God pardons and forgives*" what has passed of such incidents.

Having laid down the principle so clearly, the verdict is stated in detail: "*Those who separate themselves from their wives by saying, 'You are as unlawful to me as my mother,' and then go back on what they have said, must atone by freeing a slave before the couple may resume their full marital relation. This is an admonition to you, and God is fully aware of all that you do.*" (Verse 3) God has made freeing a slave a way of atonement for various offences. This is one way Islam freed those who had fallen into slavery in consequence of the system prevalent at the time, which allowed for the enslavement of prisoners of war. Various views have been stated with regard to the phrase, "*then go back on what they have said.*" We choose the view that says that they resume marital relations which they had earlier forbidden themselves by *ẓihār*. The freeing of a slave should occur before it becomes permissible for them to so go back. A comment is added here: "*This is an admonition to you.*" (Verse 3) The atonement required is an admonition and a warning against reverting

to this totally unacceptable practice. "*God is fully aware of all that you do.*" (Verse 3) He knows its nature, how it happens and your intention in doing it.

This comment is given before the verdict is completed. It serves to keep hearts alert and to strengthen discipline, reminding people of God's authority and His knowledge of whatever is apparent or concealed. The *sūrah* then states: "*However, he who does not have the means shall fast instead for two consecutive months before the couple may resume their full marital relation; and he who is unable to do it shall feed sixty needy people.*" (Verse 4) This is followed by a comment and a directive: "*This, so that you may prove your faith in God and His Messenger.*" (Verse 4) These people were indeed believers. However, this clarification and these penalties provide a direct link between their affairs and God's order. This makes belief operative in ordinary life, giving faith real authority in society. "*Such are the bounds set by God.*" (Verse 4) He has set these bounds so that people will not transgress them. He is also angry with those who do not observe these bounds. "*Grievous suffering awaits those who will not believe,*" because of their transgression, lack of faith and going beyond the limits He has defined.

In Contention Against God

The last sentence in the verse, '*Grievous suffering awaits those who will not believe,*' is certainly a fitting ending as it completes the discussion of the woman's situation, while also providing a bridge to the theme of the next verse that speaks about those who contend against God and His Messenger. This is characteristic of the superb Qur'ānic method as it smoothly moves from one theme to another:

> *Those who contend against God and His Messenger shall be brought low as those who lived before them were brought low. We have bestowed from on high clear revelations. Shameful suffering awaits the unbelievers on the day when God will raise them all from the dead and tell them exactly all that they did in life. God will have taken it all into account, even though they may have forgotten it. God is witness to all things.* (Verses 5–6)

The opening passage of the *sūrah* provided an aspect of the care shown to the Muslim community, while this second passage provides an aspect of antagonism to the opposite group who contend against God and His Messenger. The Arabic term, *yuḥāddūn*, translated here as 'contend' is derived from the same root as the word used earlier, *ḥudūd*, which means 'boundaries'. Thus, this group are defined as taking a stand at the other boundary, confronting God and His Messenger. This gives an image of two parties in contention and confrontation. As such, it serves to show their action in a very bad light. How miserable for a creature to be in open hostility to his Creator when it is He who provides him with sustenance.

These people who are in contention "*shall be brought low as those who lived before them were brought low.*" The way this sentence is phrased in Arabic may be understood as a prayer against them. A prayer by God is a sentence of judgement that makes it inevitable since it is He who pronounces this sentence, and His will is always done. The phrase, '*those who lived before them*,' refers either to earlier communities who were punished by God, or to the then unbelievers who suffered humiliating defeats at the hands of the Muslims prior to the revelation of this *sūrah*, as happened, for example, at the Battle of Badr.

"*We have bestowed from on high clear revelations.*" This sentence separates the two fates suffered by the unbelievers in this life and in the life to come, in order to point out that both fates are clearly stated in these verses. It also tells us that these unbelievers do not face these fates as a result of ignorance or any ambiguity in the truth. Indeed, the truth has been put to them clearly and lucidly in these revelations, which they too have been given.

As the *sūrah* refers to their fate in the hereafter, it adds an inspiring comment that serves an educational purpose: "*Shameful suffering awaits the unbelievers on the day when God will raise them all from the dead and tell them exactly all that they did in life. God will have taken it all into account, even though they may have forgotten it. God is witness to all things.* (Verses 5–6) They are made to suffer shame in punishment for their arrogance. This shameful suffering will take place on the day when all will be resurrected. Thus, it will be seen by all. Besides, the suffering is determined on the basis of a true account of their deeds. If they have

forgotten these, God has recorded them all, as nothing escapes His knowledge: "*God is witness to all things.*"

The opposite cases of care and antagonism take place in God's presence and with His knowledge. He witnesses the help and care granted to the believers as well as the hostility shown to the other group. The believers should be reassured by His presence, while the unbelievers should take heed.

Whispers and Conspiracies

The *sūrah* then portrays God's presence in an inspiring image that leaves a telling effect on our hearts:

> *Are you not aware that God knows all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth? Never can a secret conversation take place between three people where He is not the fourth; nor between five where He is not the sixth, nor between less or more than that without Him being with them, wherever they may be. On the Day of Resurrection He will tell them the truth of what they used to do. God has full knowledge of everything.* (Verse 7)

The verse begins by stating God's knowledge that takes in everything in the heavens and earth. Our imagination is left to roam across the wide horizons and the remote corners of the earth, drawing a picture of this knowledge that leaves out nothing large or small, apparent or hidden, in this vast universe. It then draws gradually closer touching its addressees' hearts, presenting an image of God's knowledge that shakes them strongly: "*Never can a secret conversation take place between three people where He is not the fourth; nor between five where He is not the sixth, nor between less or more than that without Him being with them, wherever they may be.*" (Verse 7)

This is a true statement, but it is expressed in a profoundly effective way. It leaves our hearts with two contrasting feelings, trembling with awe on the one hand and reassured on the other as we amazedly feel the friendly presence of the Almighty. Thus, wherever three people meet in secret they feel that God is their fourth, and if they are five, they

realize that He is their sixth. Indeed, wherever two people whisper in secret, God is with them as He is with any larger group. Whenever we contemplate this image we are overwhelmed with awe. It is true that God's presence gives us a feeling of friendly reassurance, but it is at the same time very awesome. It is the Almighty who is present "*wherever they may be.*"

"*On the Day of Resurrection He will tell them the truth of what they used to do.*" (Verse 7) This statement sends a shudder of fear into people's hearts. The mere presence of God and His hearing of all conversations is ominous. Now they look at the consequences of this presence in the form of punishment. What happens when that which people say in secret is publicized in the presence of all on the Day of Resurrection, when all mankind of all generations are witnesses!

The verse ends in the same way as it started, giving a general image: "*God has full knowledge of everything.*" (Verse 7) Thus the notion of God's full and comprehensive knowledge, which is stated in various ways in this verse, is driven home to everyone. This inevitably leaves a profound effect on our hearts and minds.

This awesome picture of God's knowledge serves as an introduction to a warning issued to the hypocrites who held secret conversations, conspiring against the Prophet and the Muslim community in Madīnah:

> *Have you not seen how those that have been forbidden to hold secret conversations still revert to what they have been forbidden? They conspire with one another with a view to sinful doings, aggressive conduct and disobedience of God's Messenger. When these people come to you they greet you with words God does not use to greet you. They say to themselves, 'Why does God not punish us for what we say?' Hell will be punishment enough for them. They will burn there. How vile a journey's end!* (Verse 8)

The verse suggests that the Prophet's initial policy in dealing with the hypocrites was to advise them to be clear and sincere in their attitude, and to stop conspiring with the Jews against Islam. Yet still they persisted in their deviant ways, scheming against the Muslim community, trying in every way possible to disobey the Prophet and cause disruption.

The verse also suggests that some of them used to offer their greeting to the Prophet in a twisted way, giving it a bad meaning: "*When these people come to you they greet you with words God does not use to greet you.*" (Verse 8) They might have used the same means as the Jews did when they pronounced the greeting *assalām 'alaikum*, which means 'peace be to you', as, *assām 'alaikum*, which means 'death to you'. They might have used some other way that appeared innocent but which nonetheless concealed an ill wish. They even thought that had Muḥammad been truly a prophet, then God would have punished them for what they said by way of greeting or in their whispers and secret conversations.

It is clear from the way the *sūrah* opens then unfolds that God had told the Prophet of what they said and schemed. The *sūrah* began with the announcement that God heard the woman pleading with the Prophet, and then it stated that God is witness with any group, large or small. All this suggests that He informed the Prophet of the hypocrites' schemes and the thoughts they harboured.

An answer is given to their ill-conceived thoughts: "*Hell will be punishment enough for them. They will burn there. How vile a journey's end!*" (Verse 8)

What to Say in Secret

The *sūrah* then addresses the believers by their very quality of having accepted the faith. It tells them that they must not indulge in the sort of secret whispers the hypocrites resorted to, encouraging each other to commit sin, aggression and disobedience of the Prophet. It reminds them to remain God-fearing and tells them that such whispers as the hypocrites engage in is inspired by Satan who aims to cause grief to the believers. Hence, it is totally unbecoming of those who have faith:

> *Believers, when you converse in secret, do not do so with a view to sinful doings, aggressive conduct and disobedience of God's Messenger, but rather hold counsel to promote righteousness and God-consciousness. Always remain God-fearing; to Him you will be gathered. [All other kinds of] secret conversation is the work of Satan, designed to cause grief to the believers. Yet he cannot harm them in the least, unless it*

be by God's leave. In God, then, let the believers place their trust. (Verses 9–10)

It seems that some in the Muslim community had not fully absorbed the sense of Islamic discipline. Such people met when times were hard to consult among themselves, and this was unknown to their leadership. This is something contrary to the nature of the Muslim community and the spirit of Islamic discipline, which together require that every view or suggestion first be presented to the leadership, not to fringe groups. It also appears that some of these fringe groups might have stirred up trouble that could have had negative effects on the Muslim community. These people may also not have had any intention of causing harm or difficulty for the Muslim community, but by raising certain subjects and discussing them without having a full picture of the matter this could cause such harm.

The *sūrah* addresses them as believers, using their quality that establishes their bond with God. This makes the address especially effective. It tells them that should they converse in private, then their conversation must not involve anything that connotes sin, aggressive conduct or disobedience of the Prophet. The only subjects that are fitting for believers are those that '*promote righteousness and God-consciousness,*' with the aim of facilitating them and bringing about their results, which are always good. The *sūrah* reminds them that they should remain God-fearing, for they will certainly be gathered to Him and He will hold them to account for their deeds; these He knows no matter how hard they try to conceal them.

A man stopped 'Abdullāh ibn 'Umar as he was walking with a friend and asked him: "'What did you hear the Prophet say about secret conversations on the Day of Judgement?' He answered: 'I heard the Prophet when he said that God will bring a believer close to Him and shield him with His cover, so that he will not be seen by others. He will ask him about his sins, naming them one after one. When the man has acknowledged all his sins and feels that he will be doomed, God will say to him: 'I have kept these sins secret for you during your life on earth; now I forgive you them.' He will then be given the record of his good deeds. As for the unbelievers and the hypocrites, the witnesses

will point to them and say: 'These are the ones who have lied about their Lord. God's curse befalls the wrongdoers.'" [Related by Aḥmad, al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

In this way, such people are put off secret conversations and side whispers unknown to the Muslim community to which they belong and whose interests are the same as their own. In other words, they must not think themselves separate from the Muslim community in any way. The *sūrah* tells them that when other Muslims see such side whispering and secret conversations, they are hurt by them. They feel apprehensive, concerned that a lack of trust has crept into the community. Satan always tries to tempt whisperers to go further in order to cause worry and grief to others. However, the *sūrah* reassures the believers that Satan will not achieve his purpose: "*Secret conversation is the work of Satan, designed to cause grief to the believers. Yet he cannot harm them in the least, unless it be by God's leave. In God, then, let the believers place their trust.* (Verse 10) Believers place their trust in God and in no one else.

The Prophet repeatedly advised against secret conversations whenever such talk caused doubt, anxiety and apprehension. He is quoted by Ibn Mas'ūd as saying: "When there are only three of you, let there be no discussion between two of them to the exclusion of the third, for this is bound to grieve him." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

This is an aspect of fine manners, and a wise precaution against what causes suspicion. Sometimes, however, there is need for a private discussion in order to keep a secret, or to avoid a scandal. This is acceptable and it normally takes place among community leaders. It must never, however, be through a side group with the rest of the community unaware of what is going on. Such a practice is divisive and leads to friction and grief, which is Satan's aim. God's promise is definitive. Satan will not achieve his purpose by such means, because God will protect the Muslim community. He is fully aware of every secret conversation, every conspiracy against the Muslim community. Satan can never harm the believers "*unless it be by God's leave.*" (Verse 10) This exception is added to emphasize that God's will is absolute and free of restriction in any situation to which His promise applies.

"*In God, then, let the believers place their trust.*" (Verse 10) He is the Guardian who protects the believers. He is the Almighty who knows all,

the Witness to all things. Nothing in the universe escapes His knowledge. Nothing occurs unless it be by His will. He has promised to protect the believers. Could there by anything more reassuring?

Refined Manners

The believers are encouraged to maintain another aspect of good behaviour and fine manners:

> *Believers, when you are told to make room for one another in your gatherings, then do so, and God will make room for you. If you are told to rise up, then do so. God will elevate, by many degrees, those of you who believe and those who have been given knowledge. God is fully aware of all that you do.* (Verse 11)

Reports speaking about the revelation of this verse suggest that it actually related to the hypocrites, which makes it more relevant to the flow of the *sūrah*. Qatādah mentions that this verse speaks about gatherings for voluntary worship. When those who were already sitting with the Prophet saw someone coming to join them, they were obviously keen to retain their own positions close to the Prophet. Here, God orders them to make room for each other.

Muqātil ibn Ḥayyān reports:

> This verse was revealed on a Friday, when the Prophet was at al-Ṣuffah where the place was rather narrow. He used to honour those who attended the Battle of Badr from among the Muhājirīn and the Anṣār. Some people who fought at Badr came to join him but the place was already taken up. They stood facing the Prophet and greeted him. He replied to their greeting. Then they greeted the people sitting with the Prophet and those replied. They continued to stand, hoping that those present would make room for them. The Prophet realized why they remained standing and that nobody had made room for them. He was displeased. Therefore, he said to some of those from the Muhājirīn and the Anṣār who did not take part in Badr to stand up, choosing them by name. He asked to stand up as many as there were standing. Those who were thus asked to

> stand felt this to be hard. The Prophet noticed that they looked upset. Some hypocrites exploited this, saying to the believers: 'Do you not say that your man is fair to all people? We certainly saw him being unfair to these. Here were some people who had already sat in their places, eager to be close to their Prophet, yet he asked them to stand up, giving their places to ones who came late…' The Prophet is reported to have said a prayer: 'May God have mercy on one who makes room for his brother.' After that, people used to quickly rise in order to make room for their brothers.

If this report is authentic, it should be understood as not being in conflict with other *aḥādīth* that forbid someone to ask his brother to stand up so as to sit in his place, such as that which says: "Let no man make another rise from his position so as to sit in his place. Rather, move closer and make room for others." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Other instructions by the Prophet make it clear that a person who is joining a sitting group should sit at the end. He must not walk over people's shoulders so as to be in front. The Qur'ānic verse urges those who are sitting to make room for those joining them. It also urges obedience, requiring the one who is seated to rise if he is asked to do so. This order, however, is given by the leader responsible for organizing the group, not by the newcomer.

The purpose behind all this is to instil into people the feeling of welcome towards the newcomer before actually making room for him to sit. When that feeling is genuine, people are pleased to see others joining them, and those seated receive the newcomers warmly, willingly making room for them. However, if the person in charge thinks that a particular place should be given to a newcomer for a special reason, his instructions should be readily and happily complied with, observing at the same time the overall rules of not walking over people's shoulders or making one person stand to let another sit in his place. It should all be done with mutual tolerance.

Again we note the Qur'ānic method of making people willing to comply with every instruction. The *sūrah* promises those who make room for others that God will make good room for them: "*Believers, when you are told to make room for one another in your gatherings, then*

do so, and God will make room for you." (Verse 11) It also promises those who were instructed to leave their place so as to give it to others that they will enjoy an elevated position with God: "*If you are told to rise up, then do so. God will elevate, by many degrees, those of you who believe and those who have been given knowledge.*" (Verse 11) This, in recompense for their obedience and accommodating attitude.

The occasion was one of being close to the Prophet in order to learn from him. The *sūrah* teaches believers that good faith, which makes people accommodating and obedient, and knowledge, which refines hearts and manners, will ensure a higher position with God. This as a reward for willingly vacating a position close to the Prophet, obeying his order given for a particular purpose he had in mind: "*God is fully aware of all that you do.*" (Verse 11) He rewards people according to what He knows of their feelings and intentions.

This is yet another example of the Qur'ānic method of educating Muslims, teaching them to be kindly, accommodating and helpful by bringing out their better feelings. Religion does not work by giving firm instructions that must be literally obeyed; rather, it relies on changing people's feelings and sensitivities.

The Qur'ān also teaches them to refine their manners when dealing with the Prophet. It appears that people were eager to talk to the Prophet privately, each seeking his advice concerning his own private matter, or merely to have the pleasure of being alone with him. People did not seem to appreciate the demands on the Prophet's time, with all his social and public responsibilities, or they did not realize that a matter for which they wanted a private conference with the Prophet must be a serious one. Therefore, God wanted them to understand that it was necessary to impose a tax, for the benefit of the community, to be paid by the person who wanted the Prophet to attend to his personal problem because he was taking up some of the Prophet's time which was devoted to the community. This tax took the form of a charity which should be paid before attending the Prophet:

> *Believers, when you wish to speak to God's Messenger in private, offer something in charity before you speak to him. That is better for you and more conducive to purity. If you do not have the means, God is Much-Forgiving, Ever Merciful.* (Verse 12)

'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib was the one who acted on the instructions given in this verse. According to reports, he set aside a number of dirhams, i.e. the silver currency of the time. Whenever he wanted to speak alone to the Prophet he gave one dirham in charity. This requirement was nonetheless difficult for the Muslims, as they were generally poor. The instruction, however, fulfilled its purpose, making them aware of the value of a private conference with the Prophet. God lightened their burden, revealing the next verse which abrogated the requirement of paying to charity before such a conference took place. The verse also directed the Muslims to attend better to their various aspects of worship:

> *Do you hesitate to offer charity before you speak with the Prophet? Since you did not offer charity, and God has turned to you in His mercy, attend regularly to prayer and pay your* zakāt *[i.e. obligatory charity] and obey God and His Messenger. God is well aware of your actions.* (Verse 13)

These two verses and the reports we have about the occasions in which they were revealed provide an aspect of the educational efforts that aimed to cultivate the manners and social approach of the Muslim community, even in matters of detail that were not particularly serious.

False Swearing

The *sūrah* speaks anew about the hypocrites who befriended the Jews in Madīnah, describing their true position and attitude. It threatens to expose their hypocrisy and to inflict a terrible end upon them. It makes clear that Islam will be triumphant, despite all their schemes and conspiracies:

> *Have you not seen those who would be friends with people who have incurred God's anger? They belong neither to you nor to them. They knowingly swear to falsehood. God has prepared for them grievous suffering. Evil indeed is what they do. They use their oaths as a cover [for their falseness], and they turn people away from the path of God. Hence, shameful suffering awaits them. Neither their wealth nor their children will be of the least avail to them against God. They are destined*

> *for the fire, where they will abide. On the day when God will raise them all from the dead, they will swear before Him as they swear now before you, thinking that they have something to stand upon. It is they who are indeed liars. Satan has gained mastery over them and thus caused them to remain oblivious of the remembrance of God. They are the party of Satan. It is the partisans of Satan who will truly be the losers.* (Verses 14–19)

This strong denunciation of the hypocrites who befriended those who had incurred God's anger, i.e. the Jews, suggests that these hypocrites were very active in scheming against the Muslim community, conspiring with its avowed enemies. It also suggests that the authority of Islam had now been consolidated so as to strike fear into the hypocrites' hearts. Thus, when the Prophet and the believers confronted them with what God might have exposed of their scheming, they resorted to swearing falsely, denying what was attributed to them, knowing, however, that they lied as they swore. They hoped that by thus forswearing they would spare themselves any punishment for scheming against the Muslim community: "*They use their oaths as a cover [for their falseness], and they turn people away from the path of God.*" (Verse 16)

Repeated warnings are issued to them in this passage: "*God has prepared for them grievous suffering. Evil indeed is what they do.*" (Verse 15) "*Hence, shameful suffering awaits them. Neither their wealth nor their children will be of the least avail to them against God. They are destined for the fire, where they will abide.*" (Verses 16–17) The *sūrah* describes their abject and miserable position on the Day of Judgement when they will swear to God as they used to swear to people: "*On the day when God will raise them all from the dead, they will swear before Him as they swear now before you.*" This description suggests that hypocrisy had become so entrenched in their hearts that it would remain with them on the Day of Judgement, in the presence of God who knows people's deepest secrets and innermost thoughts: "*Thinking that they have something to stand upon,*" when they actually stand on nothing, not even thin air.

The *sūrah* brands them as confirmed liars: "*It is they who are indeed liars.*" (Verse 18) It then explains the cause of their condition: "*Satan has gained mastery over them and thus caused them to remain oblivious of the*

remembrance of God." (Verse 19) A heart that forgets to remember God becomes corrupt and given to evil: "*They are the party of Satan.*" (Verse 19) They stand under his banner, act in his name, obey his instructions, work for his objectives. This situation of unmitigated evil ends in total loss: "*It is the partisans of Satan who will truly be the losers.*" (Verse 19)

Such a strong denunciation certainly fits the evil and the harm those hypocrites intended towards the Muslim community. It also reassures the Muslims that God is with them, exposing their hidden enemies.

Such hypocrites were intimate with the Jews, thinking that they were a power to be reckoned with. Hence they always sought their help and advice. Therefore, God makes it clear to them that His enemies will always suffer defeat and humiliation, while His cause and His messengers will be victorious:

> *Those who contend against God and His Messenger will be among the most abject. God has thus ordained: 'I shall most certainly prevail, I and My messengers.' God is indeed powerful, almighty.* (Verses 20–21)

This is indeed a true promise made by God: it came true in the past and will always come true, despite appearances that may suggest that it will not be so fulfilled. What actually happened was that the message of God's oneness overpowered unbelief and idolatry. The Islamic faith was well established on earth and humanity accepted its supremacy after a long struggle against unbelief, polytheism and atheism that ended in the total defeat of these evil forces. There were periods in which atheism or polytheism managed to gain power in certain areas, as happens today with some states that are openly atheist or polytheistic, yet belief in God generally remains dominant in the world. Besides, atheism and polytheism will always be short lived, because they are not fit to survive.[3] Humanity discovers every day new evidence guiding it to believe in God and to the consolidation of faith and belief in His oneness.

A believer treats a promise by God as a confirmed and undoubted fact. Should what be on the ground at any time or place be contrary to this, then that which is on the ground is false and transitory. It occurs on

3. Future events, viz. the collapse of Communism, confirmed the author's view. He wrote this in the early 1960s when Communism was in its heyday. – Editor's note.

earth for a limited period and for a purpose only God knows. It may be there to awaken faith in people's hearts, so that it takes over and God's promise is fulfilled at its appointed time.

When we look today at the determined onslaught against the people of faith, in its numerous forms of suppression, pressure and scheming, we remember God's true promise. The onslaught has been so ferocious that large numbers of believers have been killed, tortured, left destitute and deprived of their livelihoods. Yet faith remained firm in believers' hearts, protecting them from yielding and protecting their communities from loss of identity and annihilation by attacking forces. It has also saved these communities from submitting to tyranny except for short periods during which they rallied their forces to defeat such oppression. When we look at this across the generations we realize that God's promise will undoubtedly come true. We find this now in the present situation without need to wait for long.

Anyhow, a believer will never entertain any doubt that God's promise is the truth and that this will certainly take place. Those who contend against God and His Messenger will be the most abject of people, for God and His messengers will triumph. A believer is absolutely certain that all this is inevitable, that it will be done, regardless of appearances to the contrary.

The Measure of Faith

As the *sūrah* draws to its close, it outlines the constant rule that believers apply, or the accurate measure of faith as it settles in people's hearts:

> *You shall not find people who truly believe in God and the Last Day on friendly terms with those who contend against God and His Messenger, even though they may be their fathers, sons, brothers, or kindred. These are the people in whose hearts God has inscribed faith, and whom He has strengthened with a spirit of His own. He will admit them into gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide. Well pleased is God with them, and they with Him. They are the party of God. It is the partisans of God that will be truly successful.* (Verse 22)

This provides complete comparison between God's party and the party of Satan. It is a question of taking one's final and unhesitating position with the party of distinction, after discarding all burdens and temptations, so as to uphold the one and only tie. "*You shall not find people who truly believe in God and the Last Day on friendly terms with those who contend against God and His Messenger.*" (Verse 22) Never has God put two hearts in one man's body. Never can anyone harbour two loves in his heart: one love for God and His Messenger and one for their enemies. It is all a question of faith or unfaith; the two can never meet.

"*Even though they may be their fathers, sons, brothers, or kindred.*" (Verse 22) All bonds of kinship and blood relations are severed when they come into conflict with faith. These bonds may however be maintained and respected if there is no contention or dispute between the two camps. The Qur'ān instructs believers to maintain good relations with parents if they are unbelievers, provided that there is no war going on between God's party and Satan's party. Should there be contention, war and conflict, these bonds are to be totally severed. Abū 'Ubaydah killed his father during the Battle of Badr; Abū Bakr wanted to kill his son 'Abd al-Raḥmān; Muṣ'ab ibn 'Umayr killed his brother 'Ubayd ibn 'Umayr; and 'Umar, Ḥamzah, 'Alī and 'Ubaydah ibn al-Ḥārith all killed their relatives. All discarded ties of blood and kinship, opting for the bond of faith. This was the best implementation of the standard of bonds and values as classified in God's measure.

"*These are the people in whose hearts God has inscribed faith.*" (Verse 22) Faith is confirmed in their hearts by God's hand, written in their breasts by His right hand. It cannot be erased or be subject to ambiguity or confusion. "*And whom He has strengthened with a spirit of His own.*" (Verse 22) They cannot achieve such resolve without the support of a spirit of His own making. Their hearts cannot beam so brightly without the light that emanates from this spirit, gives them strength and binds them to the only true source of strength and light.

"*He will admit them into gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide.*" (Verse 22) This is their reward for abandoning every tie and bond, and discarding all desire for worldly temptation. "*Well pleased is God with them, and they with Him.*" (Verse 22) This is a pleasant picture that radiates contentment and reassurance. It shows

us the situation of these believers in their lofty position and pleasant surroundings. They bask in their feeling of mutual pleasure with their Lord. They maintain their links with Him and discard all others. He then accepts them, admits them to His presence and makes it clear to them that He is pleased with them. They are gratified by this closeness to Him.

"*They are the party of God.*" They rank under His banner, move under His leadership, follow His guidance, implement His code of living, and do on earth what He has willed, as they are part of His will. "*It is the partisans of God that will be truly successful.*" (Verse 22) Who will be successful if God's partisans are not?

Thus humanity is split into two groups: God's party and Satan's party, raising two banners: the banner of the truth and the banner of falsehood. Every person must choose to either belong to God's party and support the truth or to side with Satan, standing under the banner of falsehood. The two parties are clearly separated. They can neither meet nor mix.

There is no room for ties of kinship, marriage, clan, community, country, race or nation. The only admissible tie is that of faith. Whoever chooses it will find that all those who stand under its banner maintain a tie of brotherhood. They might belong to different races, colours, countries, tribes and families, but they all share in the tie that forms God's party. Thus all differences between them disappear. Anyone who stands under the banner of falsehood will not enjoy a tie or bond with any among God's party. The main tie, to which all other ties are secondary, has been severed, so all ties are severed.

This verse suggests that there were some people within the Muslim community who still felt the strength of ties of blood, kindred and friendship. It thus seeks to put things very clearly. It also shows that others in the ranks of the Muslim community had managed to achieve the required standard, discarding all bonds other than that of faith.

This picture provides the finest possible ending to this *sūrah*. It started by portraying the care God takes of His community of believers, outlining the case of a poor woman who pleaded with the Prophet about her husband, stating that God listened to her concerns. With such care granted by God, placing the tie with Him above all else is the natural response. Opting for God's party is the only course acceptable from the community God has chosen to fulfil the role He has assigned to it.